

# Ivory towers

Kenya's Office of the President, believe the UK may support four southern African nations in their bid to step up international ivory trade when the UN endangered species convention (Cites) meets in Nairobi next month.

"Britain has such a key presence in Kenya as a development partner that I would have expected them to better understand what opening up ivory trade would mean for us,"

On the one hand, Kenya and its east and central African allies argue that the 1990 ban on international ivory trade — partially lifted last year to allow a "one-off" sale of stockpiled tusks from Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia to Japan — must be reinstated. On the other, the three southern African nations, together with South Africa, want Cites to approve further ivory sales this year, pledging that profits will

kill the poachers. Since the stockpile sales last April, poaching has surged in Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Kenya. In Tsavo West national park, a popular Kenyan tourist spot, poaching has soared by 500%, while border prices for illegal ivory have also risen dramatically. Nationwide, 67 elephants were illegally killed last year, while 13 poachers were

While he still has only 2,030 security staff to patrol 59 protected areas and 27 national parks, covering 45,000 sq km, Rotich believes the poachers can be kept at bay — but only if the ivory ban holds. Many other states, he warns, do not have Kenya's resources to deal with a poaching epidemic, should

Kenya's wildlife director believes that tourist dollars provide the best hope for the continent. "I think that the African states need to talk to each other to heal this split over ivory trade," he says. "I would say to the southern Africans that there are major opportunities in ecotourism which they are missing because they are not making the investment. People love elephants. They will come to Africa to see them. We need to protect the African elephant's future for the entire world."

## TRAVELLERS' RIGHTS

When **Jake Bowers-Burbridge** trundled by horse and caravan through Sweden, he felt he was following the carefree ways of his Romany ancestors. But back in Britain, reality hit home

# Long road to Utopia

Just 500 miles separates England from Sweden, but if, like me, you're a Romany traveller, the gulf in attitudes is colossal. My wife and I have recently travelled with our horse and caravan between the two countries. On our journey, we experienced not only changes in the physical landscape, but profound differences in attitudes towards many of the issues that lie at the heart of a democratic society — such as race, access to land and respect for a traditional, ecologically friendly nomadic lifestyle.

Every nation without a homeland has its promised land. For the Kurds, it is Kurdistan; for us, it is Romanestan. But Romanestan is just an ideal, a utopia in time, if not in place. We may originally have come from India but I doubt that many of the world's 8 million Romanies would choose to go back there.

In 1998, I went to Sweden with my horse and wagon, in search of Romanestan. Sweden is a large country with a small population and enough living space for thousands of travellers. The roads

are empty of traffic. Its law of *allmännsrätt* (all man's rights) is a model law protecting the "right to roam". Everybody has the right to camp and gather firewood, berries, herbs and mushrooms from the countryside. Romanies are recognised as a distinct ethnic minority by the Swedish government and even have the right to be educated in their own language.

In short, Sweden is a land where Romanies have rights. It's a long way from Britain's endless fences, criminal justice act and feudal mentality towards land and class.

When I first arrived, I felt as if I had found a little piece of Romanestan.

There is, however, an eeriness about Sweden. The woods are suspiciously silent and empty. The thing that made us come back to England after two years was the total absence of travellers in the rural landscape. Romany communities in Sweden are concentrated in larger towns. Official policy has assimilated travellers entirely through generosity, by giving them all the benefits a well-funded welfare state can muster. It's a far cry from past policy — up until the

1960s, travellers were forcibly sterilised in Sweden — but probably a far smarter strategy.

If Sweden can be criticised for anything it is that life is too easy. It's so good it's unreal. I've even had free cooked breakfast delivered to my caravan door. The Swedes are a rich nation but many cannot comprehend how anybody would choose to live such a basic life.

Having a lifestyle like mine can give you the annoying status of an eccentric semi-celebrity. A passing tourist once photographed me peeing at 7 o'clock in the morning.

Another day, while fetching some water for the horse, I saw a woman walk straight into our home as if it was a tourist attraction. I've probably been photographed and filmed at least once for every mile I've travelled on Swedish roads. The exotic appeal of your life imposes different restrictions on your freedom. But that which makes you a celebrity in Scandinavia defines you as a pariah in England.

In the time of Henry VIII, there was a mandatory death sentence for Romanies. We have survived in an environment that is very hostile to

our existence. England is one of the most densely populated countries on earth, with extremely concentrated land-ownership. That's bad news if you're a nomad needing constant access to new land for fuel and food.

The right to travel is not an issue; all you need is the vehicle. It's the right to stop that is the problem. Most of the old stopping places are gone. Those that haven't had a ditch put through them by local councils have been grabbed by farmers extending their fences or disappeared under the developers' tide of concrete. The commons we once used are gone, the verges made smaller by the widening of roads.

Travelling in Britain is only possible nowadays with an extremely intimate knowledge of the countryside and a willingness to trespass in defence of the right to live as our ancestors did. We face a stark choice — settle, or engage in daily law breaking. This ongoing struggle has got to be one of the longest running and least recognised campaigns of civil disobedience this country has ever known.

Since returning to England, I've experienced all these problems. I've met travellers who have been beaten by landowners and refused water by local villagers. At the first county line we crossed, there was a police car waiting, wanting to know our names and destination. The red carpet definitely doesn't stretch to our shores.

If our culture is to survive it must be made possible through political action. By going to Sweden I've seen glimpses of Romanestan in the forests now empty of travellers. By coming home, I hope I can bring a little bit of it back to a country so in need of its promise.



Free thinkers... Jake Bowers-Burbridge and his wife on the road in Sweden (left) in search of the lifestyle led by his grandmother (pictured right, third from left)



PHOTO: DAN FRIES